

NEW MEXICO

Feds Want Molycorp Mine on Superfund List

Ian Hoffman Journal Northern Bureau

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**Studies Blame Waste Piles for Pollution**

SANTA FE -- Federal environmental regulators plan to propose listing Molycorp's mine in Questa as a Superfund site, a move they believe could stem the flow of toxic metals into the Red River.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is performing its final review of the Superfund listing proposal, tentatively slated for late January.

If the EPA and Gov. Gary Johnson approve the proposal, Molycorp's molybdenum mine could formally join 1,200 of the nation's most contaminated sites on the National Priority List as early as April. Molycorp says it will fight the listing, starting with an effort to win Johnson's opposition.

State and federal regulators turned to Superfund because talks with California-based Molycorp about cleanup collapsed. Molycorp was willing to research contamination, but the company shied at promising a cleanup, state officials said.

"They felt the state was requiring them to write a blank check for cleanup," said Maura Hanning, a geologist in charge of Superfund oversight for the New Mexico Environment Department.

The mine operated by Molycorp has been producing molybdenum, a steel-hardening agent, for 80 years. The company reports that six ore deposits remain, worth \$700 million at average prices.

A Superfund listing would put the mine on a schedule of intensive scientific studies, selection of a cleanup plan and then cleanup. The work is likely to take years and cost tens, possibly hundreds of millions of dollars. Superfund would make Molycorp and possibly its parent company, Unocal, liable for those costs.

Molycorp executives have told state officials that the mine probably could not continue to operate if it were listed as a Superfund site. State officials say the mine could operate during a cleanup.

The cleanup likely would center on Molycorp's piles of waste rock, estimated at more than 300 million tons. Recent state and federal studies peg those piles as a leading source of toxic metals that contaminate local ground water, which then seeps into the Red River, a major tributary to the Rio Grande.

The piles are rich in sulphur-based ores; rain and snowmelt percolate through the rock and turn to sulphuric acid that picks up metals and carries them into ground water.

Metals have contaminated a single residential well. The acid leachate also picks up aluminum, a nerve toxin that turns the Red River a soapy blue and is thought to have eliminated the river's

naturally reproducing trout population.

"The Red River is a major concern," said Susan Webster, Superfund site-assessment team leader for the EPA's Dallas regional office. "You have miles of land and ecosystem there that are contaminated."

Molycorp officials vigorously deny the mine has polluted ground water and the river. Instead, they blame natural rock scars as the sole source for the acid-metal **pollution**.

Scientists suggest much of the contamination can be halted by moving, burying or covering the waste-rock piles.

If the mine is listed, Molycorp or EPA scientists will embark on an intensive study of the site. Then they will study the feasibility and cost of various kinds of cleanup. They could propose a plan in as little as two years, but the mine is considered a large, complex site that could take four years to study.

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